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ESSAY

Reading Brezhnev's Mind

By William Safire

I'm hoarse from shouting at Senator Percy. Clever of the Americans to send a man known to be hard of hearing, and who makes a point of his triumph over a physical handicap. I never knew for certain whether or not he had his hearing aid plugged in.

But is Percy plugged in with Reagan, who is also slightly deaf? Arbatov says no. Says that Percy is one of the last of the liberal Republicans, a vanishing breed, considered a softie by the Reagan men. Not a real emissary — the only briefing he was given was to be handed a couple of old speeches and a copy of the Republican platform. Percy speaks for himself, says Arbatov, not for Reagan.

On the other hand, Dobrynin in Washington — who saw Richard Allen, the security adviser with the American accent — sends word that Percy could be significant. Reagan may want to show he is not such a Cold War throwback, and may be using Percy as a signal before he takes power. I wonder which theory is correct?

The Americans are most confusing in their times of transition. Here I have the transcripts of Percy's press briefings in Moscow, telling people back home how tough he was informing us that SALT II is dead and how he warned us to stay out of Poland. But here are the intercepted cables from the U.S. Ambassador Watson to his superiors at State in Washington, reporting how forceful I was with Percy about SALT and showing what a pussycat he was. I like Watson's report.

My problem is this: I must know before February if Percy represents Reagan's view, and if the Americans will be willing to negotiate SALT two-and-a-half right away. In February, the Communist Party Congress meets here in Moscow to lay out the five-year plan. Decisions must be made.

If the Percy assurances are really based on Reagan's policy, then we can give the Americans some cosmetic changes in SALT II — make the new Administration appear to have gotten concessions that Carter failed to get — and ratify our deal. I must have that SALT agreement; it guarantees the superiority the Soviet Union needs to offset our encirclement.

But if the Percy talk of willingness

start my buildup. We have to double our production of backfire bombers; I promised 30 a year, but the Americans will not know for three years if we produce 60 a year. And I will have to start training our crews now for air-to-air refueling. And if we are to Mirv our SS-18's so they can carry 30 warheads instead of the agreed-upon 10, we must start now producing the plutonium and building the guidance systems.

That's what Ustinov wants, but I cannot afford it. The grain harvest was terrible; Afghanistan has been costing too much; the strikes in Poland are giving some Russians the wrong ideas. I do not need an arms race, I need more food and consumer goods. An arms race would be terrible because the Americans have the industrial capacity to win it. It's vital that they do not learn that we realize that. I need SALT II more than I can let them know.

Could it be that the Reagan advisers are shrewder than either Arbatov or Dobrynin think? Could they have sent Percy over here to lead me to think that new negotiations are possible right away, so that I will put off my February decisions? Could they be raising my hopes, so that I will be obliged to do America's bidding in Afghanistan, in the Persian Gulf, in Poland?

No, Reagan is not that smart. Look at the way Helmut Schmidt made a fool of him last week, enticing him into discussions in Washington so he could tell the Germans he had the new American President in his pocket. Well, Reagan's young.

I know what I must do: publicly interpret the Percy visit as a genuine Reagan opening to détente. That will create a momentum in the U.S. for re-opening negotiations quickly that Reagan will not be able to resist without appearing to be a warmonger. The Senate, the newspapers, the beaten Democrats and Chancellor Schmidt will all force him to be "reasonable," and accept my offer of cosmetic changes. In that way, I can take away his leverage immediately.

If Reagan waits, I would have to make negotiations more attractive for him. Jewish emigration is down to 700 a month now — I could ease up on that. On the other hand, if Reagan is captured by the new momentum of détente, I could then insist on an end to America's grain embargo. A great deal depends on who appears more eager to begin negotiations.

The riposte that worries me most is a proposal by Reagan for actual arms reductions — not just limitations — such as Carter suggested in March of 1977. Carter retreated when I became furious at that; Reagan may not.

Maybe it's time to bring Anatoly Dobrynin back to the foreign ministry. According to Mostov's latest zapiski, the Secretary of State will be Al Haig, the Defense Secretary will be Caspar Weinberger, the director of Central In-